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To: DJS </o=va/ou=exchange administrative
group (fydibohf23spdlt)/cn=recipients/cn=[REDACTED]
Cc: Ullyot, John </o=va/ou=exchange
administrative group
(fydibohf23spdlt)/cn=recipients/cn=[REDACTED] Wright, Vivieca
(Simpson) </o=va/ou=va
martinsburg/cn=recipients/cn=[REDACTED] Leinenkugel, Jake
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(fydibohf23spdlt)/cn=recipients/cn=[REDACTED] Byrne, Jim
(OGC) </o=va/ou=exchange administrative group
(fydibohf23spdlt)/cn=recipients/cn=[REDACTED] Hutton,
[REDACTED] </o=va/ou=exchange administrative group
(fydibohf23spdlt)/cn=recipients/cn=[REDACTED] Bowman,
Thomas </o=va/ou=exchange administrative group
(fydibohf23spdlt)/cn=recipients/cn=[REDACTED]
Bcc:
Subject: Washington Post: VA chief took in Wimbledon, river cruise on European work trip; wife's expenses covered
Date: Fri Sep 29 2017 14:28:21 EDT
Attachments:

FYI, sir. John Ullyot wanted you to see this.

VA chief took in Wimbledon, river cruise on European work trip; wife's expenses covered

By Jack Gillum, Alex Horton, Drew Harwell and Lisa Rein

The Washington Post

September 29

https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/va-chief-took-in-wimbledon-river-cruise-on-european-work-trip/2017/09/29/c1f17046-a458-11e7-8c37-e1d99ad6aa22_story.html?utm_term=.e1dc62de5991

Nearly three days into a trip to Europe this past July, Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin had attended a Wimbledon championship tennis match, toured Westminster Abbey and taken a cruise on the Thames.

The 10-day trip was not entirely a vacation. Shulkin was in Europe for meetings with Danish and British officials about veterans' health issues.

Yet he and his wife spent about half their time sightseeing, including shopping and touring historic sites, according to an itinerary obtained by The Washington Post and confirmed by a U.S. official familiar with their activities.

Shulkin's six-person traveling party included his acting undersecretary of health and her husband, his chief of staff and another aide, the itinerary says. They were accompanied by a security detail of as many as six people.

The agency said Friday that the government paid airfare for Merle Bari, Shulkin's wife, because she was traveling on "approved invitational orders." The government also provided a per diem for her meals, the agency said.

While some Trump administration Cabinet members have faced scrutiny over their use of private and government jets, Shulkin traveled on a commercial flight, seated in coach on at least one leg.

The European visit, however, puts a focus on the mixing of business and leisure during these trips, which can come at great taxpayer expense. Shulkin's immediate predecessor, Robert McDonald, took no foreign work trips, according to a former VA official who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Shulkin's trip came less than two weeks after he signed a memo instructing top VA staffers to determine whether "employee travel in their organization is essential."

"I expect this will result in decreased employee travel and generate savings within the Department of Veterans Affairs," Shulkin wrote.

In response to questions from The Post, VA announced Friday that the agency will begin posting details of the secretary's travel online, including itineraries, and disclosing any use of government or private aircraft. That information had not previously been disclosed publicly.

All of Shulkin's activities on the European trip, including his attendance at Wimbledon, "were reviewed and approved by ethics counsel," VA press secretary Curt Cashour said in an emailed statement.

"These were important trips with our allies to discuss best practices for taking care of veterans," Cashour said. "The secretary has been transparent on his down-time activities that were similar to what he would have done with his family over a weekend in the U.S."

Cashour said the husband of Poonam Alaih, the acting undersecretary for health, paid his own expenses.

Alaih did not respond to several voice-mail messages since late Thursday seeking comment from The Post. VA declined to make her available for an interview.

Senior members of Congress, including two key Republicans, have also expressed concerns about travel by officials in the Trump Cabinet. The leaders of the House Oversight Committee, Chairman Trey Gowdy (R-S.C.) and Rep. Elijah E. Cummings (D-Md.), wrote to the White House this week to demand records on air travel for executive officials since Donald Trump's inauguration, saying that official travel "by no means should include personal use."

Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, also wrote Trump a letter Thursday asking what steps the administration has taken to "ensure Cabinet secretaries use the most fiscally responsible travel in accordance with the public trust they hold."

One ethics expert said the trip sends the wrong message to taxpayers, especially if the spouses' expenses were paid by the government.

"That's kind of a long trip for the secretary to be gone," said Walter M. Shaub Jr., a vocal critic of the Trump administration who resigned in July as the federal government's top ethics watchdog. "The cost has got to be extravagant."

Shulkin was invited to attend a July 19 conference in London with representatives of Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In past years, the conference has regularly been attended by the VA secretary.

Also, he arranged to attend an earlier series of meetings in Denmark from July 12 to 14. Officials in Denmark said VA officials approached them about the meetings.

The bookend events left him with four days in between with no daytime business, according to his itinerary. He attended a ceremony one night at which a British veteran of the war in Afghanistan was honored, and a meeting the next night at the British prime minister's residence.

It is not clear whether the London invitation came before or after the scheduling of the events in Copenhagen, which included speaking with several Danish health-care executives at a luncheon organized by a Danish business group. A spokesman for one company in attendance, Leo Pharmaceuticals, said the CEOs were asked by the Danish Foreign Affairs Ministry to attend.

In any event, the Copenhagen meetings occurred at a time the business group said was inconvenient because it was a holiday period for Danes.

"It was quite difficult for us to accommodate," said Kasper Ernest, a director at the Confederation of Danish Enterprise, noting that his group's chief executive could not attend. "I was also on holiday."

The Wimbledon event was one of the prized moments of the tennis year: In the ladies' final, American Venus Williams would lose her chance at a sixth title to Spain's Garbiñe Muguruza.

Shulkin and his entourage also visited four palaces — Copenhagen's Christiansborg and Amalienborg and London's Buckingham and Kensington — and included times for walks, self-guided tours and photo stops.

On one calendar item, a canal tour of Copenhagen, the itinerary specifically noted the group "Will See Little Mermaid Statue," one of the city's most iconic public artworks. During the London visit, Shulkin and his wife shared a meal at a restaurant overlooking a tennis court with Victoria Gosling, a British leader of the Invictus Games, a sports tournament for wounded veterans. Gosling posted a photo of the gathering on Twitter.

"Great honour and a pleasure to host US Secretary of the VA and his lovely family," Gosling wrote.

Representatives at the Sage Foundation, where she is a director, said she was not available for comment.

Shulkin's relationship with Danish government leaders has grown over the past year, Danish officials said, and Denmark's military had been heavily involved in the war in Afghanistan.

In a statement, the Danish Embassy in Washington said it has had "a close dialogue with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for a couple of years based on the long-standing partnership between Denmark and the USA on global conflicts. Over this period, there has been a standing invitation to visit Denmark."

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Press Secretary

Department of Veterans Affairs

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@ [REDACTED] (b) (6)

From: DJS </o=va/ou=exchange administrative group (fydibohf23spdlt)/cn=recipients/cn=[REDACTED]
To: Alaigh, Poonam, M.D. </o=va/ou=exchange administrative group (fydibohf23spdlt)/cn=recipients/cn=[REDACTED]
Cc:
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Subject: FW: Washington Post: VA chief took in Wimbledon, river cruise on European work trip; wife's expenses covered
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